

Blessed Complexities, Cursed Confusions:
Identity Conflicts of Multilingual Persons

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Transcending Borders

CATESOL Conference
San Diego
April 14, 2007

Proceedings of the CATESOL State Conference, 2007

I perceive, feel, think and operate differently as American English-speaking “Julie”; *en español, como Julia* (who loves *la salsa!*); *auf Deutsch, wie die Frau O’Herin* (who is punctual and loves to debate theology); and *po-russkiy, kak Yulya*, whose soul, with the first syllables, fills with the fatalistic passion of expansive mother Russia.

Is this an identity disorder psychosis, as in the film, “The Three Faces of Eve” (Johnson, 1957)? Are individual “dialect demons” possessing me? Can the social/cultural/mental/emotional worldview framework of each sociolinguistic mindset be adopted so quickly as to tangibly influence my personality and relating style, simply by switching languages? And which person am I, really?

People have enough trouble defining themselves and determining what they want in life when they operate within a single language and culture, but the job gets trickier when they live in a world of multiple lexicons, grammars, histories, cultures, audiences and social systems, where identity and perceptions vary by language context. This paper considers situations of multilingual individuals dealing with their own senses of identity, their perspectives on the languages they have learned, and their choices of language use. We note how their personalities reflect their various language environments, transforming as those environments change. The notions of personal voice, values and worldview as influenced by language are briefly pondered. The costs as well as the benefits of multilingualism are recognized, and we acknowledge that as multilingualism gains prevalence, we would be wise to seek to understand this phenomenon, as it will only increase within our linguistically complex world today.

To transcend “the intellectual, linguistic, and pedagogical borders that are represented daily in our classrooms” (Guleff, 2007 CATESOL Program, p. 2), participants at this presentation (most of whom were multilingual) considered questions such as Who am I?, Who is like me?, Who understands me? and How can I explain? as applied to teachers, students and families as we function and relate at school, work and home within our multicultural TESOL communities.

I. Those who peruse, those who use

There is a difference between those who peruse a language and those who deliberately engage in significant thought and activities through the medium of a well-spoken second or third language. The first learner may well receive new insights, perspectives or understanding through dabbling in the foreign tongue, but only when communication facility reaches a functional level of fluency does operating in it really change one’s thinking processes. When the multilingual person expresses himself¹ in a given language, he finds that its characteristics infiltrate his ideas, perceptions, feelings and manner.

¹ Gender neutrality in this paper is expressed by alternating sex of nonspecific 3rd person references by paragraph.

Claire Kramsch, in *The Multilingual Subject* (2006), calls language a “symbolic system [that] creates and shapes who we are... [touching] the core of who we are” (pp. 100-101). Aronin & Laoire (2004) declare language a “defining attribute of the individual,” that “represents and mediates the crucial element of identity” (p. 11). Because one who is multilingual has language options, every time she opens her mouth, she must make a choice of which language to use, and that choice will determine the “global shift” in the way she thinks, feels and operates in that conversation (p. 25). Her overall “repertoire” of known languages composes an interrelated “essential balance of the ecosystem” of her makeup, each language being a crucial part of the sum of her selfhood (p. 26). Identity, then, is tied to the language we use, and if we use several, we must deal with integrated identity complexities, and with our perspective on them. While *knowing* a little of another language introduces us to a new “flavor,” *operating in* another language changes us from the inside out. These shifts and choices affect us in TESOL.

II. Those who choose, those who muse

Children develop language abilities when presented with two factors: exposure and need (Sorace & Ladd, 2002). When a new language is introduced after childhood, whether due to immigration, social changes, political or economic necessity or simply personal interest, they will learn to use it if they need it; and when they employ this language shift, it will introduce yet another identity for them. Kramsch calls language “not just an unmotivated formal construct but an embodied reality...not simply an agglomeration of encoded meanings that are cognitively internalized and then applied in social contexts; rather, it is the potential medium for the expression of their innermost aspirations, awarenesses and conflicts” (2006, p. 99). Because of this power in language, as learners add languages, they construct a new “social identity” and sense of “self” within each new language context (p. 97). So, for “an increasing number of people around the world who, by choice or necessity, experience life in several languages,” language “creates subjectivities that these multilingual speakers use to conjure alternative worlds and virtual selves” (p. 97). As language and identity interact, Kramsch asserts that “the act of speaking a different language can both threaten the speaker’s self and relocate it” (p. 98). The difficulty of negotiating between worlds and selves grows exponentially with each added language as we become “travelers between languages” (p.98), seeking meaning that is stable among scenarios of constant cross-linguistic change.

As we add languages, we become competent in more places, but may feel we don’t belong to any one place; so where do we fit, and where is home? We struggle with this trade-off in our experiences as language and culture learners. As our human need for identification is met by what Kramsch terms “the construction of a new

social identity in a foreign language” that grows as we develop our language skills (2006, p. 101), we mourn becoming more different and foreign from the places from which we have come. Lamarre and Dagenais (2004) interviewed young trilingual and quadrilingual subjects in Canada about their identities and found many who viewed themselves positively, though their identities are perceived as “complex, even contradictory and ambiguous,” described as feeling “spread out,” “hybrid,” “multiculturalist,” “having many identities,” and belonging “to the whole world....” (p. 69).

The poignant anthology of testimonies of *Third Culture Kids* (coined by Useem, 1993) who don’t know where they fit fill Eidse and Sichel’s (2004) *Unrooted Childhoods: Memoirs of Growing Up Global*. *Third Culture Kids* (TCKs) bounce between languages and build “relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any” (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999, p.19). Such nomadic multilingual children suffer a “complex identity formation,” feel they don’t belong anywhere, and therefore “belong” among others who similarly wander the world (Eidse & Sichel, 2004, p. 2). These “unrooted children absorb fragments of the many cultures” to which they are exposed and “develop kaleidoscopic identities” (2004, p. 3). “Language, place, family and community shift for these children with each geographic move,” causing a “slippery” self-image and the inability to “conform to standard definitions of who they are. They are composites, bits and pieces added with each relocation, each new cultural influence” (p. 2). Their paradox, according to Eidse and Sichel, is that they see incredible benefits matched by deep losses in their lack of being permanently rooted, feeling it to be “both liberating and isolating,” an “enrichment” and an “estrangement,” producing adaptive but lonely, “resilient” but “restless” persons open to emotional vulnerability, psychological pain and physical stress, yet experiencing and comprehending so much of the world and its excitement, culture and adventure (pp. 3-4).

Ariel Dorfman (2004) said he needed to solve “the question of how to hold on to the language that defined my identity if I did not inhabit the country where it was spoken,” and found English to be “the efficient instrument of my intimacy, the inner kingdom I could control” through writing a diary (pp. 281, 284). When author Carlos Fuentes (2004) “wanted to write in order to show myself that my identity and my country were real,” he learned “that I must in fact write in Spanish” (p. 296). These individuals each had to muse about how to relate to their languages before they could choose which language to adopt.

Speakers of Other Languages’ heritage languages influence students and classrooms in many ways which may enrich, confuse or detract from learning. My Korean-speaking adult ESL students would quietly defer to the eldest when speaking in Korean, yet aggressively debated when using English. My friend Rosa is conservative when she speaks Spanish, but becomes liberal in English (Heckenberg, 2007). Attitudes and awareness can vary significantly among multilinguals.

Writer and editor Marie Arana (2004) feared she was living a lie being an imposter as she “acted” in her multiple roles as a multilingual, multicultural person, “trying on languages like so many dresses” (p. 303). But now she accepts her multiple personalities and characters, calling herself a “bridge” spanning across cultures:

I count both cultures as my own. But I’m happy to be who I am, strung between identities, shuttling from one to another, switching from brain to brain. I am the product of people who launched from one land to another, who slipped into other skins, lived by other rules – yet never put their cultures behind them.... (p. 305)

III. Those who refuse, those who lose

Survival is necessary and bridges are desirable, but what about those who *do* put their cultures and languages behind them, running away from bad situations, blocking out horrible memories, or perhaps simply forgetting what lies behind in the interest of making good in their new worlds? Ariel Dorfman was born “Vladimiro,” but despised and felt ashamed of his name and Russian heritage so much that he wanted to “throw Vlady into the sea, drown the [S.O.B.], and baptize myself with my true and princely title,” which he chose from English (later changing it to Spanish) (2004, p. 280).

Language professor and TCK Peter Ruppert (2004) suffered greatly as a war refugee from Hungary during the 1940s. He was forced from his home and language at six and “managed four languages in six countries within the first decade of my life. Each new language displaced the previous one, just as each new country gave way to the next” (p. 251). When Ruppert became separated from his family, the young boy reacted by refusing to speak at all for months, and after their reunion, suffered a lifelong stutter – “an affliction that has caused me more hardship, more personal grief and anxiety, than anything else in my life” (Ruppert, 2004, p. 252). While it is hard to separate the many causes of Ruppert’s trauma, language was certainly perceived to be a central factor in the pain he underwent. Ruppert ended up losing his mother tongue of Hungarian, and his local native dialect is in danger of dying out in his generation. How much of Ruppert’s heritage and language did he push away, suppress or refuse, and how much did he lose from it being forcibly ripped from him?

Many similar cases of language and identity shift in multilinguals have been artfully recorded. In Kinginger (2004), we read how Alice, a poor young American from family viewed as hillbilly, “trailer trash” white lower-class chose to reinvent herself and negotiate “many facets of her identity: social, linguistic, ... and class” by forsaking her American English, devoting herself to moving to France and becoming fluent in French, thereby “reorienting” herself to “become a cultured person” (p. 240). The bittersweet modern “Pygmalion” account (Shaw, 1916) of Alice’s stubborn determination and persistence in reshaping her personality, self-image and life experience illustrates the difficulties people encounter when they try to deny who they have been and drastically alter how they operate sociolinguistically, while it demonstrates the transforming powers of language

to grant “access to sociocultural worlds, participation, and imagination” (p. 241) which can reshape our world from the inside out. Alice’s Cinderella godmother was a French dictionary!

Giampapa (2004) surveys language choices in the struggles of Italian Canadians in Toronto, trying to negotiate within, across and between their different cultural worlds, creating “centers” and “peripheries” of identity and using language to alternately include or exclude themselves as needed as they move among groups within their multilingual environment (p. 192). Edwards (2004), in “Language Minorities,” speaks of similar behavior in the phenomena of “minorities *within* minorities” (as with Aborigines in Quebec or Abkhazians in Caucasian Georgia) (p. 455). Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) discuss “*hybridity*” that “enables the appearance of new and alternative identity options” (p. 17). These all show patterns of shifting allegiances and code-switching as utilized to redefine identity in multilingual settings.

Travel author Pico Iyer (2004) puts it best when he writes, “I have a wardrobe of selves from which to choose. And I savor the luxury of being able to be an Indian in Cuba...or an American in Thailand... [or] an Englishman in New York” (p. 14). In his essay, “Living in the Transit Lounge,” he sees today “an entirely new breed of people, a transcontinental tribe of wanderers” (2004, p. 9) for whom mobile living creates a “new kind of soul that is being born out of a new kind of life,” in which, as perpetual outsiders seeing transience as normative, “disorientation is as alien as affiliation” (p. 14). This generation of drifters is shaped by the fascinating but rootless world which Iyer describes with haunting dispassion:

Alienation, we are taught from kindergarten, is the condition of the time. This is the century of exiles and refugees, of boat people and statelessness; the time when traditions have been abolished, and men become closer to machines. This is the century of estrangement: more than a third of all Afghans live outside Afghanistan; the second city of the Khmers is a refugee camp; the second tongue of Belfast is Chinese....” (2004, p. 12)

Estrangement – from our cultures, our homelands, our roots – results from displacement and results in foreignness in every corner. This alienates us and binds us together at the same time, according to Iyer, who claims his personal self-assertion through using language and dialect to create his “wardrobe” of selfhoods.

Language losses – whether we consciously choose to reject our languages or feel like helpless bystanders watching them slip away – change who we are and how we feel about them. Pavlenko (2005) documents loss of language among immigrants, foreign students and oppressed ethnic groups, observing that “when considering emotions as relational phenomena, we discover that a language that once elicited affection may begin to arouse anger and resentment and be repressed and rejected, only to go back full circle to evoke tenderness, love, and sadness for all the losses inflicted by the time of separation” (p. 225).

Blessed complexities, cursed confusions; a child wants to belong to the culture of his parents’ heritage language and be able to talk with his grandparents, but also seeks an identity within the neighborhood outside his

door, and struggles to find a balance. Advantages abound in today's global marketplace for those who know multiple languages, and the "cross-cultural awareness and understanding" which accompany that linguistic knowledge provide added benefits to being multilingual (Birner, 2002, p. 3). Can the identity of a multilingual be seen, not as conflicted or convoluted, but simply complex? Or be positively seen as a compounded gift, creating a composite, valued resource? Yes!, and all multilinguals find occasion to appreciate their skills as they apply them in various ways. In the Bible (2002), Moses, Joseph, Daniel, Paul and even Jesus found their multicultural and multilingual backgrounds served a greater purpose as they served and related to multiple audiences.

Combinations of attitude, context and application tip the scales toward either the conflicted or the composite outlook on multilingualism. While one comes to her selection of language by intentional choice, another suffers upheaval and shifts language by force or necessity. Neither remains intact in monolingual thinking, but where the language capacities of both become fractured, one may find multiplied, refracted colors resulting, where the other sees only broken pieces, no longer coherent. Prism or prison, every multilingual person gains and loses something from her variety, simply because in saying "yes" to one she must say "no," for a time, to the other. Languages truly open doors to people, but walking through them creates an insider/outsider division that will determine choices from that point on.

Alienation, lost traditions, no affiliation...those bleak statements may relate to TESOL contexts. Students and teachers alike have stories to tell, whether adjusting as Generation 1.5, losing a heritage language, experiencing refugee status or grieving loss caused by emigration for economic or educational reasons. Helping them to be articulated and heard can promote understanding.

IV. Values, Views and Voices – Whose?

Language significantly influences identity and personality, allowing differing values, views and voices to be represented by varying language use choices and patterns among multilinguals. Every conscious move to another language, from the child reciting a studied verse to adult polyglots discussing multinational business or diplomacy, invokes a change in the way we think, feel and operate. If we shift often enough, we are subconsciously affected, not only by our choices, but by our choice to keep choosing. Change is stressful; and he who ventures out of one language, and then another, becomes marked by his journey.

These excerpts from Eva Hoffman (1989) chronicle her journey through language and culture from Poland to Canada to the USA in *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*:

Our Polish names didn't refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can't yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself. We walk to our seats, into a roomful of unknown faces, with names that make us strangers to ourselves.

We want to be at home in our tongue.... to be able to give voice accurately and fully to ourselves and our sense of the world.

When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative. Like everybody, I am the sum of my languages – the language of my family and childhood, and education and friendship, and love, and the larger, changing world....

...I'm searching for a true voice...through layers of acquired voices...the Babel of our multiple selves....
(pp. 105, 124, 273, 274)

The wonders enjoyed in discovering new worldviews can reward us tremendously as we pass through polyglossia. The stability of one language – a home base, relationally and psychologically – may be just an idealized dream in today's multilingual world. Several panels, workshops, and presentations at CATESOL 2007 offered means to explore and express background and selfhood through journals, poetry, essays, music, rap, photography, art and crafts, helping multilingual students and others gratefully and insightfully experience their journey through the languages and cultures comprising their identities. Kudos to them for transcending sociolinguistic borders in these creative and effective ways! May awareness of our wonderful diversity foster better understanding, may sensitivity to its complex issues increase our appreciation of one another, and may our ability to see the perspectives of multilingual individuals allow us the gift of greater depth perception of their – and our – unique individuality! Let us appreciate multilingualism with a growing consciousness that our language buffet brings us costs along with the benefits, sorrows with the joys, and losses as well as gains. As long as we recognize that, we can make peace with our pieces, be reconciled to our refracted, reflected nature, and grow towards understanding and acceptance of our mixed-up, marvelous, multiple selves.

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